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Palmyra Island

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A letter to Mom — >7A

The time? 1956 — during my tenure as an aircraft maintenance officer for the US Air Force, Hickam Air ForceBase, Hawaii:

Another fabulous experience, another story—this time a trip to the little tropical island called Palmyra, 1,000 miles southwest of Hawaii.

This trip was not so easy to obtain. It took some mighty tall talking and being at the right place at the right time. I got wind of the trip because the plane they were to take was one I am in charge of maintenancewise, a C-54 or DC-4. There were many reasons for the trip: one was to send people down there to set up an observations station for the forthcoming Geophysical Year of 1957; another was to set up an observation station for the forthcoming bomb tests in the Pacific; and the third was to carry equipment to set up a hotel on the island for a new type of tourist attraction. There was 77,000 pounds of cargo, which included a 3,50(Upound diesel generator, a washer, drier, freezer, icebox, lawnmower, 14AJbot boat and outboard, collapsible shower, and a 90Cbpound butane tank. In order to get all this equipment off the planeit as necessary to dismantle a crane and carry it along, since there is no lifting facility t there.

The island is privately owned and on lease to a development corporation for these projects. It is an atoll formed out of coral and covered with palm trees and dense tropical growth. It is not really one island, but seven or more surrounding one large lagoon that is teaming with fish of every type and variety. Birds also inhabit the island by the millions and are very tame. Terns, boobies, endlessly live a screeching and happy life there. During the wanthe Navy took over the island for a defense installation, and at one time there were 6,000 men on the island. Now all there is left is a few buildings that are overgrown and tumbled down,ahd many pill boxes and thousands of beer bottles. The Navy just picked up and left, leaving behind most of their equipment. We found beds and tables and even a tug that had rotted away and sunk right at the pier. Before the war, a man who is now known as ’crazy" Otto skipped ship from a German war vessel and ended up on this island and was hired by the people who own the island as caretaker. He was ushered out during the war, but returned afterward and has been the only human inhabitant of the island for fifteen years. He is sheriff, fire chief, customs officer, and ruler of his domain and has all the badges and a sense of humor to back it up. When we landed,he was there to greet us with all the customs papers to be signed before anyone could get off the plane.

Before I go any further I want to tell you about the crew that was aboard the plane. A more motley bunch you have never seen. At the head o of the list was Hickam AFB Commander, Col. Comnenator as Copilot; a retired Lt. Col., who was executive secretary of the development corporation; two 2nd LtsJ/tnyself and Joe Bova whom I have written you about before; twojjiaster sergeants who were flight engineers; a Navy Commander; a crew of engineers (4J representing Sperry Gyroscope; three Hawaiian workers who were going down to the island to stay as workmen; 21 people in all. We were jammed in the famous Air Force bucket seats, facing all the cargo. We all tried to find a spot in which to stretch out after we were under way with very little luck. I anticipated this and put my air

mattress in my pack, so was comfortable on the floor though I occasionally got a foot in the face as people moved around in the plane. We had no heating in the plane and it was very cold at 8,000 feet, the altitude of the.6;hour flight. I stayed a little warm by piling — Mae Wests over me and climbing into two thin flight suits. What a joyous trip!

The plane loaded at two in the morning and was off the around about 2: 30. It was loaded with 21 people and the heavy cargo I told you about before. The takeoff weight was 77,000 pounds which was within 200 pounds of the maximum allowable load. I knew the plane would be crowded so I brought along my air mattress to stretch out on the floor. There was hardly enough room for the mattress on the cabin sole, so people were continually stepping on me or around me.

I woke up after a bumpy, trodden-upon ride to behold aj?eautiful sunrise breaking the cumulous cloud puffs. Then we were descending and a head of us there appeared breakers and coral heads breaking out of the indigoJblue sea. We arrived at the atoll and flew around it twice about nine o'clock in the morning. The coral heads took the shape of an oval and soon we could see green islands, a dozen or more forming the Palmyra group. We flew around the largest of the islands which contained a 6A 000-fdot airstrip, partially grown over, which was practically the length of the island. We got some excellent pictures from the air showing what the island atoll is like, j

Below us in the boatphannel approach to the main island were two wrecks of ships. One, an old barge that had run onto a coral head during a storm and the other a new wreck of /, a motor sailer that had struck a coral head during the night on its way into the harbor. It had been there only since last September and so looked in very good shape, though listing badly and firmly planted just a few yards off the harbor channel. As we let down, the pilot touched the runway barely feet from the edge of the water. Our pilot made a beautiful landing on the air strip which was constructed of rolled coral and oil composition. The end of the runway where we touched d "down was wide and in good shape, but as we ran down the runway, it narrowed down practically to a path, and as we were coming to a stop the props were chewing up weeds. The runway was 6,000 feet long when constructed, but one end had over grown, but was still safe for landing and taking off. We scooted down the runway past dense palnTttfee groves and tumbledAdown buildings, marks of the last war. The runway got narrower and narrower and soon I wondered whether we had landed on an airstrip or a palm grove. As we stopped there was a little opening and the plane swung around and began the mile long taxi to the other end of the strip.

As the last prop turned to a stop, "Crazy" Otto appeared with brief case and customs papers in hand ready to be signed before we could get off the plane. He wore a tattered straw hat with a brightly colored hat band and even more tattered pair of gym shoes. His leathery, sunburned face sported a full growth of gray whiskers which formed a sort of go-tee. He spoke with little accent and had a handshake like a vice. He was accompanied by the first mate of the motor sailer and two jeeps they had salvaged from her cargo. Indeed, this was equally as motley a crew as we had aboard our plane.

The air was hot and muggy as we began to unload the components of the crane to be assembled on the ground.... Palmyra is only a few degrees above the equator. The heaviest portion weighing 500 pounds took the combined efforts of five of us to set up for assembly. Forty-five minutes later we had the crane together and began the arduous task

of off-loading the C-54. Three and a half hours and washers, dryers, generators, boats, freezers later we waded out into the water at the end of the runway, donning fins, masks, snorkels[A]and spears. Tropical fish abounded and they were very curious of the newcorrfers into their domain. The numerous sharks in the a area had littl^p, do with us--they had much tastier tidbits in the tropical fish. In fact I have never even cajme across a curious shark. There is little danger of them if you stay beneath the surface and don't thrash, but we saw many while sight-seeing around the island. While diving, we came across a giant black clam about 15 inches across that we wrenched free of the rocks and stored carefully aboard the plane.

After this short skin diving expedition, we joined the others at the "hotel" for lunch. The "hotel" was an old camouflaged two story wooden building, of approximately 15 rooms. There, we had canned fruit, pumpernickel, pickles, and peanut butter. The kitchen was complete with the modern conveniences; a sink with running water caught in a large sump tank on the roof from the frequent rains, a gas stove with a wood stove connected to it (the only one that was used until we brought more butane), and a refrigerator that acted merely as a cupboard since there was no electricity (the small generator had broken dowp and there was no gas left anyway). In the adjoining room was the "commissar#",-or supply room, carefully kept under lock and key, though there were no inhabitants on the island to carry off anything.

Following our lunch, a tour of the surrounding islands was arranged by our host, “Crazy" Otto. We all piled into a jeep towing a trailer, top rank taking the "seats" in the jeep on down to the lowly 2nd Lts. taking the standing.roon>.ohly in the trailer. What followed was, I believe, the roughest ride I have had in my life. We rode over coconut tree logs, through dense tropical growth, over miles of coconuts, through shallow-water lagoons, and sand and coral. The coconut groves were so thick, all sunlight was filtered out, and ever#[A] where we set foot were coconuts, hermit crabs, who stole their shell homes from long departed sea shells, abounded everywhere; hardly a step was taken without one scurrying out of the way. As we went from island to island on the thin causeways built during the war, the life that flourished there changed remarkably. On one little islet had nothing but palm trees, and from the coconuts that had dropped from them more palm trees were sprouting, splitting their mother home in half. The bird inhabitants confined themselves to the island with huge balsa wood-type trees rising to over 100 feet above the ground. There were so many birds of so many varieties, that they were practically having mid-air collisions. A place to roost among the branches was an asset sought after by all others, resulting in lively and loud squawking and screeching of all winged inhabitants. All young ones were left to roost on the small trees that grew low to the ground along the shore. There they were planted by their parents apparently to stay, for they only gawked or pecked at you when you walked within inches of them. They raised their white fuzz on ttteir necks and let out an equally angry screech as their parents who were fighting for a resting spots when we came too near. As we waded along the beach, [A]-a pure white little birdswith an ebony-black bill and eyes, similar to a dove in shape and size, hovered above us, and when we put out handiin the air as if to hold food tidbits aloft, they would come down within inches to inspect their new find. It was all a fairy land of huge trees, screeching, squawking, gawking, hovering birds with an intensely hot sun bearing down upon us.

In the lagoons fish were literally stacked one upon another. When an occasional shark would swim though for his dinner, all the small fish would leap out of the way. We could

follow the course of the sharks across the shallow lagoon by the small fish jumping out of the way of the invader. A rock thrown in the water would make them go wild and they would practically jump onto the shore in their flight. Along the shore, large crabs a foot or so across would scoot in and out of the water, or under a coconut at the slightest noise. Everywhere the pattern of life was evident; eat or be eaten. Big fish fed on smaller fish, smaller fish ate little fish and so on. Only the birds seemed content to eat only fish though the sharks did a good job on devouring baby birds.

As we bumped along in the trailer, we passed many cement pill-boxes and the perpetual American beer bottle left there for posterity and the birds. Deep in one grove of trees we came upon the old bomb-proof hospital. It was built in Quonset hut style, and laid out like a wheel with spokes coming from a central hub, or administration section. It was so grown over, it could hardly be seen from 50 yards away. Inside it was dark because there were no windows and the cement walls were feet thick. All the door ways were multiple and offset so that no bomb fragments could enter the wards. Rooted beds still stood in their place and many of the fixtures remained.

After our jeep ride; we were to go to one of the other islands by boat to pick up some of our crew who had gone over to fish. The small outboard was moored next to an old seaplane ramp which formed a small inlet. As we boarded the boat, we saw a large manta ray with a 6-foot wing spread that must have weighed two hundred pounds or more, swim leisurely into the inlet. Joe Bova and I had our face masks with us so we decided to join the ray in the water to get a closer look. We asked the group whether a manta ray was dangerous and when we found out it wasn't, Joe and I dove in immediately. The water was murky, so visibility was limited and the people on shore had to direct us to our prey. I had no fins on so could not swim as fast as the ray. Consequently, I maneuvered so the ray and I were heading toward one another. Suddenly out of the cloudy water we came upon each other face to face. To say the least, I was startled, and I think the ray was just as surprised for we both turned and proceeded quickly in opposite directions. Getting up more courage, Joe and I followed him and got a closer look. He was black on top, with a large blue -and. white scoopfShaped mouth which he used to scoop up great quantities of water containing minute plankton on which they feed. His underside was white with gill slits out of which comes the filtered water. This ray was a baby in comparison to the size the manta can attain. Feeding off the smallest living creature that inhabits the sea, the manta ray becomes one of the largest fish to prowl the seas, sometimes becoming many thousands of pounds in weight and of immense size. In my first encounter with one of these fish, though a small one, was a very memorable experience. The next day at work all we heard was the story about those crazy 2nd Lts. who jump in the water after anything.

The day was wearing away and the sun got low on the horizon. I had time to cast a line into the water and have my lure and some line stolen by a large fish before loading aboard the no[A]yjempty C-54. Initially, the pilot had trouble starting the engines and it was getting dark. A few more minutes of delay and we would not be able to take off the nearly overgrown runway. It was close, but the engines finally took hold, and we started down the runway for a white-knuckle lift off. We were off the ground at dusk after bidding farewell to the workers and "Crazy” Otto and receiving another vice-grip handshake, we all vowed to return to this tropical island paradise as we settled down to the 6 hour back to Hickam AFB, Hawaii. p.

So that was another of my more memorable experiences in the Pacific. I hope many more are to come. They say to volunteer for anything in the service is suicide, but this was one time that didn't prove to be true. I'll be first on the volunteer list to any more of the outlying islands in the future. Since the aircraft that will go are under my jurisdiction so far as maintenance goes, I will probably get many more chances. I hope so.

Love, Don

Dear,

This is Wade Lt. The grand style & clear observations you made are a treasure. Pardon my unsolicited edit.

Additional presentation is to use a serif type like Times. Helvetica is better for headings. sans-serif font does not "guide the eye". Also, try 2 columns & justified margins. long lines are hard to read.

Perhaps this needs to be more true to the actual words Young Don wrote so ignore my edit if you like.

I'd be glad to scan photos & put this on our Web page! Has Barb (new address) seen it?